

Just a few days after Nat Levy's thirteenth birthday, he and his dad Dave return to England for the first time in seven years. Since his mother died, the two of them have been travelling from country to country, wherever Dave can pick up work, and Nat has been playing street football with the local kids whenever he has a chance – even on Copa Cabana beach in Rio de Janeiro!

With the shock to being back to England, the only positive aspect is that they are close to Hatton Rangers, the football club they both follow, but the club is struggling to avoid relegation and possible bankruptcy. Amazingly, Nat's football skills are spotted and he is put forward for a trial at the club. However, there is something fishy going on at the club that is looking increasingly dangerous...

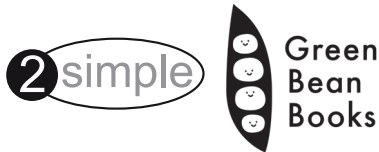


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Everything is made up for your entertainment.



Published in 2019 by Green Bean Books,
c/o Pen & Sword Books Ltd,
47 Church Street, Barnsley, S. Yorkshire, S70 2AS
www.greenbeanbooks.com

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PUBLISHING HISTORY

Striker Boy was first published by Frances Lincoln Children's Books in 2010. 2Simple published a new edition in October 2017 with all revenue going to good causes including the British mental health charity Mind. This new Green Bean Books edition has extra material by Ivor Baddiel.

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ISBN 978-1-78438-544-6

Typeset by JCS Publishing Services Ltd, www.jcs-publishing.co.uk
Printed and bound XXXXX

In the Net

Nat hit the soccer ball with phenomenal power. The white leather orb flew forward, and thirty thousand seats in the Ivy Stadium slammed shut as the crowd leaped to its feet.

The ball swept around the opponents' wall.

The goalie saw it late. He was the world's number-one keeper—he'd kept a clean sheet for the last twelve matches. He flung his arm desperately, but was no match for the sheer force and placement of the strike. He could only brush a tiny area of the ball's surface with his fingertips before it smashed into the back of the net.

The crowd went crazy; a huge mesh of green and white, arms waving wildly, fists raised aloft, and ecstatic expressions on faces.

The voice of the stadium announcer boomed out from the giant speaker system.

"A goal for Hatton Rangers, scored on thirty-three minutes, by ... number nine, Nat Levy!"

Cheers, whistles, and thunderous applause echoed around the stadium.

Nat punched the air with delight, clutched the Rangers logo on his green and white vertically striped shirt, and ran to face the giant bank of spectators. He was a lifelong Hatton Rangers supporter—a local boy made good.

Striker Boy

Nat lapped up the adulation and waved his hands, encouraging more. But then suddenly, a single voice cut through the electricity of the moment.

“Nice goal,” shouted Nat’s dad, “but if we don’t get a move on, we’ll miss the ferry.”

Immediately, the imaginary Hatton Rangers crowd and stadium fizzled into nothingness and Nat was back at the docks of Calais, France.

He waved goodbye to the three French kids he’d been playing with and laughed as they started arguing among themselves about whose turn it was to be goalie next. He grabbed his backpack off the ground and hurried after his dad. They strolled over to the ferry walkway, showed their tickets and were waved on.

Nat stepped onto the walkway and glanced back one last time at French soil. His body jangled with nerves; he was filled with excitement, but also with dread.

After seven years spent traveling the world, he and his dad were finally going home.

Past and Present

The ferry journey had been quick and uneventful, and the cab Nat and his dad caught at Dover was heading northward. It was a gray English day in April, with a light wind and the occasional bit of drizzle. Nat gazed at his reflection in the cab window.

Staring back at him was a boy with light-green, almond-shaped eyes, a snub nose, smooth cheeks, a tiny L-shaped dimple on his chin, and long, straight, light-brown hair that fell over his eyes like a curtain. “Is there a face in there?” his dad often joked with him.

Nat was nearly six feet tall and well built, factors that made many people assume he was far older than his thirteen years. In fact he’d only just turned thirteen a few days ago, something he and his dad had celebrated by going out to dinner in Paris, then on to a synagogue, where they’d persuaded the rabbi to bar mitzvah him the following weekend. He glanced across the cab at his dad, Dave Levy, who was looking out of his window, clutching his beloved harmonica.

At least he isn’t playing it. Nat smiled to himself.

People often refused to believe that Nat and Dave were related—they looked so different. Dave had much fairer skin. His eyes were cobalt blue and far rounder than Nat’s.

Striker Boy

His nose was long and thin, he had cropped salt-and-pepper hair, and a permanent scattering of stubble on his face.

As the cab sped on, Nat thought for the millionth time about that terrible February morning seven years ago when his dad had picked him up early from school and told him about Mum's car crash. It had felt like Nat's whole world had caved in and buried him alive. Mum was dead; he'd never see her again.

The funeral was the next day and, after sitting shiva for the rest of the week, they had left England. Dave said they couldn't stay and be haunted by memories of her.

For Nat, the pain of Mum's loss had receded over the years, but he still missed her and thought about her every day, especially on her *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of her death.

In spite of Mum's death, Dave was generally a pretty positive and laid-back kind of guy. But in the last few months, Nat had noticed a change come over him. He had started to look like someone with serious issues on his mind. Things had come to a head a month ago.

"We're going back to England," Dave announced one evening. "I can't keep on dragging you around the world, with no sense of purpose or direction. It's time you got a bit of stability in your life."

Nat was too stunned to speak.

"I've put down a deposit on a cottage I found on eBay," his dad went on. "It needs a bit of fixing up, but we're going to settle down there—make a home."

This sudden cascade of information completely overwhelmed Nat.

On one level he was delighted to be going back to England; he'd be among people who spoke the same language, he'd understand the TV shows, he'd be able to get his favorite chocolate éclair candies, and bagels and lox. And most important of all, it was where Hatton Rangers were based!

But on another level, he felt a deep twist of anxiety in the pit of his stomach. How would he feel returning to the country where Mum had been killed? And besides, he was used to moving on—seeing loads of different places. Settling down sounded so ... permanent.

Plus, he and his dad had no family in the UK. Nat's grandparents had died years ago and he hadn't kept in touch with any of his friends from elementary school; he could hardly remember what they looked like. All of Dave's friends had known him through Mum, and he had found it too painful to stay in contact with any of them.

Nat turned to face the window again and watched green fields, farmhouses, and streams passing by. He felt the muggy air in the cab pulling at his weary eyelids and as he drifted toward sleep, he thought of his two favorite subjects—his beloved Hatton Rangers and the year he and his dad had spent in Brazil.